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THE MUSICAL TIMES, And Singing Class Circular.

MAY 1st, 1857.

TRUTH ABOUT MUSIC & MUSICIANS.

LETTER VI.—MENDELSSOHN.

Translated from the German by SABILLA NOVELLO.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN BARTHOLDY (*born in Hamburg, 3rd Feb., 1809, died in Leipzig, 4th Nov., 1847*). Mendelssohn received from Nature unusual talent and capacities, not only for music, but for all intellectual, and even corporeal activity. From his earliest youth, he comprehended with wonderful ease all that was taught him, retained it indelibly in his iron memory, and employed it readily and successfully. This explains the great extent of his knowledge and powers, his rare universal cultivation, and the large number of his productions, considering the short duration of his life. He understood Latin, Greek, and Spanish; he spoke and wrote, without fault, French, English, and Italian; he painted excellently, and sketched from Nature with a true hand; he distinguished himself in all bodily exercises, as a swimmer, rider, gymnast, and graceful dancer: all these, however, were subordinate things with him, which he appropriated to himself as passing amusements; the greatest portion of his time and life was devoted to the study and pursuit of music. If we consider him in his character of composer, we find, during the commencement of his career, great similarity between him and Mozart;—the same impressibility for music, the same desire of learning and capacity of comprehension, the same early ability for scientific contrapuntal combination, the same never-resting wish and power of creation, with the same rapid progress as performer. Nevertheless, Mendelssohn was not, in our time, what Mozart was in his; the cause may be easily found. Mozart existed during a period of *development* in musical art,—Mendelssohn appeared during a period of forward cultivation; the first was born in the early dawn of Art,—the latter during its meridian height. Mozart's extraordinary genius was unusually excited and sustained by a revolutionary epoch in music, while Mendelssohn's equally extraordinary powers were exercised during a more tranquil, civilized, and contented epoch,—one of those periods in which Art appears to repose, and collect new vigor for further flights. In such times, the greatest intellects can only equal their predecessors. Thus it was with Mendelssohn; he stood eminent in, but he did not progress beyond his age.

His numerous works may be divided into three classes. To the first belong those not yet freed from the influence of his stiff, pedantic teacher, Zelter; to the second, those dictated by industry

—created as *tasks*, not by inward impulsion; to the third, those which flowed from his earnest mind,—from the matured vigor of his united powers,—and which, therefore, display all the poetry of his soul in full beauty and strength. I purposely used the expression “classes,” and not “progressive periods,” in mentioning his music; for the latter do not exist, and no one can assert that his compositions may be traced to different periods of his life: what he was, he always was; and throughout different portions of his life, works belonging to the three above-named classes issued from his pen.

The disadvantageous, nay, injurious influence of Zelter's instruction lay in too pre-eminent and minute attention to artificial combinations in counterpoint, fugues, canons, &c.; for, though we cannot deny that the extraordinary ability attained by Mendelssohn in this branch of science rendered production easier, and sustained, and increased his desire of creation, yet we must acknowledge that the constant study of ancient forms and shackled style gave to his imagination a characteristic which often is strongly discernible, and subjected his compositions to blame for want of melody: nay, sometimes this ability, in conjunction with the mastery of modulation, in which science he was superior to all his cotemporaries, led him to compose without impulse. We may perhaps trace to the same cause Mendelssohn's preference for oratorio and sacred music in general. When, however, his genius was really excited, he conquered and dispelled the dark clouds cast on his fancy by the study of ancient schools, and the works he then created may rank near to, even equal with those of the best masters. They possess one great excellence: they are constructed entirely of original ideas, for throughout we shall find nothing which might be called a reminiscence.

It is this abundance of independent thoughts which has raised him above most composers of his time, for at present new subjects are rare, and are generally but old subjects consciously or unconsciously remodelled. The principal characteristic of his works is a peculiar tenderness,—I should almost say that this tenderness is felt even when he displays most grandeur and power. In this respect he resembles Spohr; but he has more fire, more impulse, and, occasionally, more humour: the instrumentation, also, of Spohr and Mendelssohn is similar—sweet, smooth, refined, and noble; the stunning effect of brass instruments, which some modern and *modernest* composers use without pity against the ears of an audience, is disagreeable to both masters, in whose works trombones are seldom introduced, or always with moderation.

Beethoven, in his third period, and Mendelssohn, throughout his career, especially developed and employed polyphone subjects; all the parts of his works are independent and individual—

necessary nerves and muscles of the conjoint organisation,—not, as formerly, mere dispersed chords to sustain melody. You may remember, that I have blamed this polyphone part-construction, *on the whole*, because it easily leads to confusion or want of clearness; but Mendelssohn understood the art of conducting several such independent parts simultaneously, without misleading the listener—even more, of producing a clear, united tone-picture, notwithstanding the diversity of its component elements. His works occasionally contain a novelty, which I cannot possibly consider advisable; I mean the perceptible attempts, here and there, to conceal divisions of periods by letting them flow into one another, so that, in these cases, we hear an uninterrupted succession of ideas, gliding without cease across the mind—we can detect no sections: this impedes the perception of his musical presentments,—at least, for some time; and is as great a defect as is committed by authors who spin endless, wearisome phrases.

All that which is unsymmetrical or incomprehensible is a fault against Art. Seldom, or never, has any composer found so many imitators as Mendelssohn, partly because his creations undoubtedly contain much that is beautiful and effective, but partly because they were spread by the fame of their composer, and recommended by *fashion*; thus imitators thought easily to gain applause by imitating the admired Mendelssohn. Art has not gained by this, for, as usual, imitators have copied precisely those points which should be avoided,—intricate, interwoven construction of periods, occasionally, but seldom used by Mendelssohn. They follow not only the principles on which he developed his musical ideas—which principles are the same as those of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven—but they reproduce his ideas, and thus resemble those painters, who all their life copy the works of their masters, and never furnish new and original creations.

If a musician's best works be those in which he displays himself most independent of other masters (of course at the same time observing due requisites of Art), then among Mendelssohn's works the highest honor belongs to his overtures, especially those to *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Caves of Fingal*. In his oratorios, psalms, and other sacred compositions, he has followed his predecessors, Bach and Handel; in his piano-forte works, his *Lieder*, &c., his talent is undoubtedly displayed, but not in so striking a manner as in the above-named overtures, which incontestibly belong to a class of music which, until his time, was considered by large numbers of connoisseurs to be unworthy of Art: this class is descriptive instrumental music. It was asserted, even without excepting those of Beethoven's pieces which belong to this style, that instrumental music should only depict the emotions of the soul, the feelings and passions of Man—not outward appearances of Nature and of familiar life;

because feelings can only awaken other feelings. I have already proved to you the error of this theory. In the *Adagio* of "A calm sea and prosperous journey," Mendelssohn has not only described the feelings excited in Man by the view of a peaceful, immeasurable ocean,—but also the peaceful, immeasurable ocean *itself*, the ship's progress and happy arrival in port. I cannot, however, deny that, in this much-praised piece, he has gone *too far*, and entered into too slight details of description,—such as, for instance, the hoisting of the sails, &c. By this he injured the unity of the whole, and I therefore find this overture open to the blame of *disjointed form*; its instrumentation, also, occasionally exceeds the limits of harmonious sound, because the composer aims at truthfulness in things beyond the reach of music: for the same reason, I cannot place his "Beautiful Melusine" among his best works.

Mendelssohn has produced important, successful works in all classes of composition, excepting in opera music. In his 16th year, he produced *The Marriage of Camacho*, at Berlin, but it did not succeed: the operetta, *The Return (Son and Stranger)* was never intended by him for public performance, but he desired to obtain fame in dramatic composition, and sought assiduously a libretto which might suit him; at last, he fancied he had obtained this in Geibel's *Lorelei*. But, curiously enough, he did not commence composing with the energy and warmth necessary for such an undertaking—he worked at it but slowly, and at intervals—he occupied himself at the same time with a new grand oratorio, *Christus*. Was it that he could not overcome a certain timidity? Was his genius more inclined to oratorio than to opera? Or did he wish to compensate for the possible failure of an opera by a simultaneous production of an oratorio which might sustain his fame? Fate denied him the accomplishment of these great plans! It is much to be regretted that *Lorelei* was never completed, for the fragments which exist give sure tokens of a great work, though it might never have been as universally popular as Mozart's and Weber's operas. His oratorios, especially *St. Paul*, approach the standard I have set up, with respect to church music, of which Mendelssohn, better than any other, might have become the reformer; unfortunately, he would not, or could not free himself from the traditional usages of sacred music.

It is not only as a composer that Mendelssohn was pre-eminent among his cotemporaries; he was a performer of highest and most refined class. His mechanical execution was the more worthy of admiration on account of the little time bestowed on its cultivation; he himself prized it little for itself—he never sat down to the piano-forte in order to display the elasticity of his hands and the rapidity of his fingers, and nothing vexed him more than praise of his execution alone; he merely used it as a means of delivering the true

spirit of a composition, and in this it will be difficult for any one to surpass him. His organ-playing was equal to his pianoforte-playing. One might imagine him a master of former ages, devoted lifelong to the combinations of counterpoint: that which the most careful study enables some moderns to commit to paper, flowed from him extemporaneously.

Mendelssohn as a conductor was even greater than as a performer; Nature, education, and study united to make him a model in this respect. His noble figure, his ardent eye, his quick ear, his universal cultivation, his presence of mind in unexpected difficulties, his gift of eloquence, which could be imposing on necessary occasions, his accurate knowledge and comprehension of musical masterpieces, and lastly, his early practice as director of numerous performers, enabled him to succeed in an undertaking which few have achieved in equal perfection; Beethoven's symphonies, performed at Leipzig under his direction, are proofs of my assertion.

Mendelssohn has often been termed a lucky artiste, because destiny bestowed on him all that was necessary to the undisturbed cultivation of his extraordinary intellect. It has been said, that from his youth until his end he never knew care, was blessed with competence, and therefore was not obliged to court favor from the great or from the public,—and that, therefore, what he attained was no wonder, nay more, no merit. But—and in this he proved himself a true artist—he never pursued Art like a rich man,—now and then, as an intellectual refreshment after worldly pleasures, or as a mere amusement: he considered himself as a priest consecrated to Art; he accepted heavy orders on every hand, and worked more diligently, perseveringly, and earnestly, than many a man who should, but does not gain his bread thus.

On one point he entirely agreed with me in opinion: he declared that musical criticism, as at present exercised, was an element detrimental to creative artists, which might mislead or fetter, but never improve them. *For this reason, he never, on principle, read newspaper criticisms;*—for this reason, he had a real antipathy to æsthetic chatter, as he termed it, and never entered into conversation with so-called æsthetics. With practical musicians, on the contrary, he loved to discourse, especially about particular points—about the “*trade*,” and on these occasions he uttered many excellent remarks, many practical hints, in simple, intelligible words.

Mendelssohn was rather irritable, and in particular, easily and instantaneously put out of humour when music was treated as a light amusement, and subjected to a running accompaniment of agreeable conversation. He has been known, at such times, to rise in the middle of a piece, and go away without further ceremony, although, when he met with real attention and love of Art, he would play untiringly for hours.

HANDEL FESTIVAL.—CRYSTAL PALACE.

THIS important undertaking gradually advances, and promises a result far more prosperous than could have been anticipated. Material progress has been made in perfecting the choruses, and each singer has been properly tried, so as to guarantee the selection of those only who are thoroughly competent.

The numbers and distribution of the orchestra are already determined on. There will be 76 first violins, 74 second violins, 50 violas, 50 violoncellos, and 50 double-basses (in all, 300 stringed instruments); 9 flutes, 9 oboës, 9 clarinets, 9 bassoons, 12 horns, 12 trumpets and cornets, 9 trombones, 3 ophicleides, 9 serpents and bass-horns, 3 drums, and 6 side-drums (90 wind instruments)—a force hitherto unprecedented.

The organ, constructed expressly for the occasion by Messrs. Gray and Davison, will be one of great power, and on an appropriately gigantic scale. The instrument being nearly in a state of completion, the swell and great organs were recently tried in the manufactory; but, as there was not space enough, even in the very extensive premises of the makers, to put up the pedal organ, it could not be heard on that occasion. What was tested, however, was unanimously approved by the connoisseurs present. The organ will occupy a platform in the Crystal Palace of 40 feet wide by 24 deep, which will afford ample passage between each division of pipes, so that any department of the immense harmonious structure can be approached without difficulty, and at an instant's notice.

The employment of a “pneumatic” action will insure immediate response to the touch, and thus materially assist the exertions of the performer. The erection of the organ at the Crystal Palace began on the 15th ult. The weight of the new instrument will be somewhere about 20 tons, which, as it is to remain a fixture, will demand a platform of the most solid and durable nature. A list of the stops, &c., may probably interest those of our readers who are either players upon the organ, or admirers of it, as the chief instrumental representative of sacred music. We therefore append the following *resumé*, premising that it has four rows of keys—CC to A in *alt.*

GREAT ORGAN.—Double open diapason, 16 feet; double dulciana, 16 feet; open diapason, 8 feet; flute à Parillon, 8 feet; claribel flute, 8; flute harmonique, 8; quint, 6; flute octaviano, 4; twelfth, 3; super-octave, 2; flageolet harmonique, 2. Mixture—Four Ranks. Furniture, 3; cymbal, 5; contra-trombone, 16; posauane, 8; trumpet harmonique, 8; clarion, 4; octave-clarion, 2.

PEDAL ORGAN.—Contra-bass, 32 feet; open diapason (wood), 16; open diapason (metal), 16; violin, 16; octave, 8; twelfth, 6; super-octave, 4. Mixture—Four Ranks. Contra-bombarde, 32 feet; bombarde, 16; trumpet, 8; clarion, 4.

CHOIR ORGAN.—Bourdon, 16 feet; gamba, 8; salciodal, 8; voix céleste, 8; clarinett flute, 8; gems-horn, 4; claribel flute, 4; spitz flute, 2; piccolo, 2. Mixture—Three Ranks. Cor Anglais and bassoons, 8; trumpet, 8.

SWELL ORGAN.—Bourdon 16 feet; open diapason, 8; vox humana, 8; keraulophon, 8; concert flute, 8; octave, 4; flute octaviano, 4; twelfth, 3; super-octave, 2. Mixture—Four Ranks. Furniture, 3; piccolo-harmonique, 2; contra-fagotte, 16; corneopane, 8; oboë, 8; clarion, 4; eeho-tromba, 8. Tremulants.

SOLO ORGAN.—Flute harmonique, 8 feet; flute octaviano, 4. Mixture—Two Ranks. Corno di bassalto, 8; grand tromba, 8.

COUPLERS.—Swells to great manual and to choir. Super-octave and sub-octave—swells to great manual. Choir, octave, and solo, to great manual. Solo, great choir, and swell manuals to pedals.

The orchestra already completed, occupies a space of 168 feet in width (just 38 feet wider than Exeter Hall), and 90 feet in depth. The seats for the performers are gradually raised, one above another, so that every instrumentalist and vocalist can have a full view of their conductor. The band will be in front, the chorus at the back. The aspect presented by this gigantic superstructure, when crowded from roof to base with singers and players, can hardly fail to be one of an imposing description. The whole is contrived on the most approved principles for insuring strength and resistance.

The sale of tickets up to the present time has been beyond the expectations of the most sanguine.